

Is Social Distancing a Form of Secular Asceticism? Archpriest Steven Kostoff

The phrase "social distancing," and the practice of doing it have now entered into our everyday discourse and actions, probably never to be forgotten even long after we are free from the coronavirus. All indications are pointing to its success in "flattening the curve" in our battle with this invidious virus. Clearly, it is the right thing to do. At first, to consciously practice social distancing took some focus and the readiness to cooperate with this directive for the sake of ourselves and others. Over a short time, it has perhaps become quite natural as we politely swerve out of the way of another person walking toward us on the sidewalk, or stand back the designated "six feet" when speaking with someone at our front door. (Health care workers, of course, cannot practice social distancing and can only protect themselves with the proper medical equipment). Not to practice social distancing is now seen as socially rude and careless. So, we have learned to discipline ourselves and thus play our own modest role as we, as a nation, struggle against a common enemy.

Yet, discipline - social or personal - does not come naturally to us as Americans. Discipline clashes with our notions of "freedom" and "self-autonomy." It makes us feel restricted in an uncomfortable way, as if our very "rights" are being compromised. The fresh protest movements now growing around the country demanding the loosening of the "stay at home" mandates that most states have issued, in order to get back to work and save jobs and livelihoods by rescuing the economy from stagnation, are building momentum by using historically-resonant words such as "liberate" or "liberty" or "rights." This is not the place and time to make a comment on this highly complex and emotionally-charged debate, but I am simply pointing out how mandated discipline or restrictions - no matter how helpful or how well defended by scientific data - can be resisted by an appeal to the basic right to liberty, freedom and autonomy of choice.

In a certain sense, as Americans we are being asked to practice some form of *asceticism*. Asceticism implies self-restraint, self-discipline/denial, limitation, and simplification of life, not for its own sake, but all for the purpose of a greater good - be it social or personal. I would suggest that those who are secularly-minded will avoid such a term - if even aware of it - because it is associated with religious practices of an unenviable, "medieval" past, like flagellation or some other form of self-abuse. Other misplaced synonyms may be equally as frightening - austerity, deprivation, mortification, repression, penance, and so forth. Based on such misunderstandings, for the secularly-minded the word asceticism does not readily come to mind. Rather, it is something to be avoided! As Orthodox Christians, we know the positive meaning of asceticism as actually leading to some form of "liberation," and not to its repression. And since we embrace ascetical practices from time-to-time, as we just did for Great Lent, we have developed a strong respect for the concept and practice. I could be stretching the meaning of the word in what I am now writing, but it seems to me that even dissociated from any religious connection we, as Americans, are now being ascetical to some degree on a daily basis in our collective attempt to minimize the effects of the coronavirus. And my initial point remains: Social distancing is a secular form of asceticism - watered down a bit or not.

Of course, as Americans we embrace all kinds of discipline when it leads to a positive goal. The two that come most readily to mind are dieting and exercise. We know that for both to be effective,

it will take a good deal of discipline. Even fasting, practiced for reasons of good health and "beauty," is a practice not unknown to the most secular of persons. Then, there are athletes and musicians. Both vocations takes hours of disciplined training, and they may combine this with either dietary restrictions, intense "workout sessions" or simply hours of repetitive practice. We can further add all of the men and women in the armed forces. Basic training is essential, and highly disciplined. Thus, we all know by experience that restraint and self-denial have their positive effects. Yet, this is now completely unmoored from any religious connotations, even though practiced "religiously." In acknowledging all of this, there is still that element of "rebellion" when any such discipline - or simplified asceticism - is mandated, ordered or directed "from above," from the "powers that be." For a large swath of the population to place oneself under such authoritative directives is simply not the "American way." But since "the right to protest" is the "American way," this movement is now gaining momentum. I would again like to clarify that I am not criticizing these open protests. I am trying to understand some of the underlying motivations and causes beyond the pressing issue of gainful employment. What is happening to literally millions of American lives *economically* because of the coronavirus is clearly tragic. Lives are being ruined, perhaps never to recover. Do we now stress biological or economic health? Agonizing decisions are being forced upon our political and social leaders.

On the other hand, for many Christians - and this includes Orthodox Christians - the terms "secular," "secularist," and "secularism" are dismissed as terms associated with some form of "godless humanism." There is a "cultural war" going on here, and Christians better remain vigilant or they will lose their "religious rights" according to many Christians (and persons of other religious backgrounds, I would assume) Therefore, these same Christians positively bristle at the thought of joining the secularly-minded in any kind of cooperative effort. In the more marginalized, "fringe" groups, to associate with the secular, or to follow directives from secular sources or authority, is nothing but a betrayal of one's faith in God. And this leads to a suspicious attitude toward "science," however that broad term is conceived. If science conflicts with a certain definition of faith, then science must be rejected, for science itself is one more manifestation of "godless humanism." This presents a whole new set of perilous choices that can have tragic consequences. For this has led many churches in America to disregard social distancing and thus to gather in large numbers well beyond the time that such gatherings were designated as dangerous, and when other places were closed by state mandate. Was this a "religious protest movement" fueled by a suspicion of secular authority, that seemed to be challenging the authority of God? Such church gathering were possible, of course, because of the separation of church and state. Many worshippers became sick with the coronavirus and a share of prominent pastors/religious leaders lost their lives to the virus in the process. I am concerned with the bad theology that "believers" coming together in faith and worship, would somehow be exempt or protected by God. This, simply, is not reality, but a fantasy engendered by a faulty understanding of what faith actually is. Even Jesus did not tempt/test God (Matt. 3:5-6), then neither should we.

Needless to say, most Christian churches - including the Orthodox Church in America and other North American Orthodox jurisdictions - have fully cooperated with the secular authorities and with the scientific community in severely restricting access to our churches, and in reducing to a "skeletal" minimum the persons allowed to conduct the services. Our own Holy Synod consulted with the "experts" in order to formulate realistic directives that primarily sought the well-being of everyone within the Church. This was a form of *ecclesial asceticism* freely embraced to serve the

faithful and the common good. It was a prudent course of action meant to minimize the burden placed upon our overwhelmed health care system. Asceticism may be personal, but it must take into account the "neighbor." "Self-limitation" cannot be a pious form of "self-centeredness." It hurt during Holy Week and Pascha, so dear to the Orthodox. But it was the right thing to do. I just read this morning that there is a coalition of conservative Christian groups energizing their churches and the faithful for what is being termed "Reopen Church Sunday" on May 3. Of course, social distancing and sanitation methods are also being emphasized. Other Christian groups, however, are questioning the timing of this movement. Is this too soon? Will it lead to another upsurge of coronavirus patients and thus (needlessly?) further tax local health care systems? Are pastors afraid that further delay will erode the faith of their flocks? Are Christians being just as fearful as the secularly-minded when facing danger to our health? But is it then wise to rush into a course of action imprudently meant to "prove" our Christian faith? Hard questions, indeed! We will have to patiently await to assess how things are unfolding. And we hope and trust that our leaders - secular and ecclesial - respond with discernment and responsibility.

There is no denying that there is a huge difference between how theistically-oriented persons and the secularly-oriented understand the world around us. These are clashing "worldviews." Our very understanding of reality is different! But we all live in the same "real" world. We can ungrudgingly cooperate with each other when the common good is at stake. We can continue to wage our ideological battles in due time. Now, however, is the time to work together. The coronavirus has had that effect on us.